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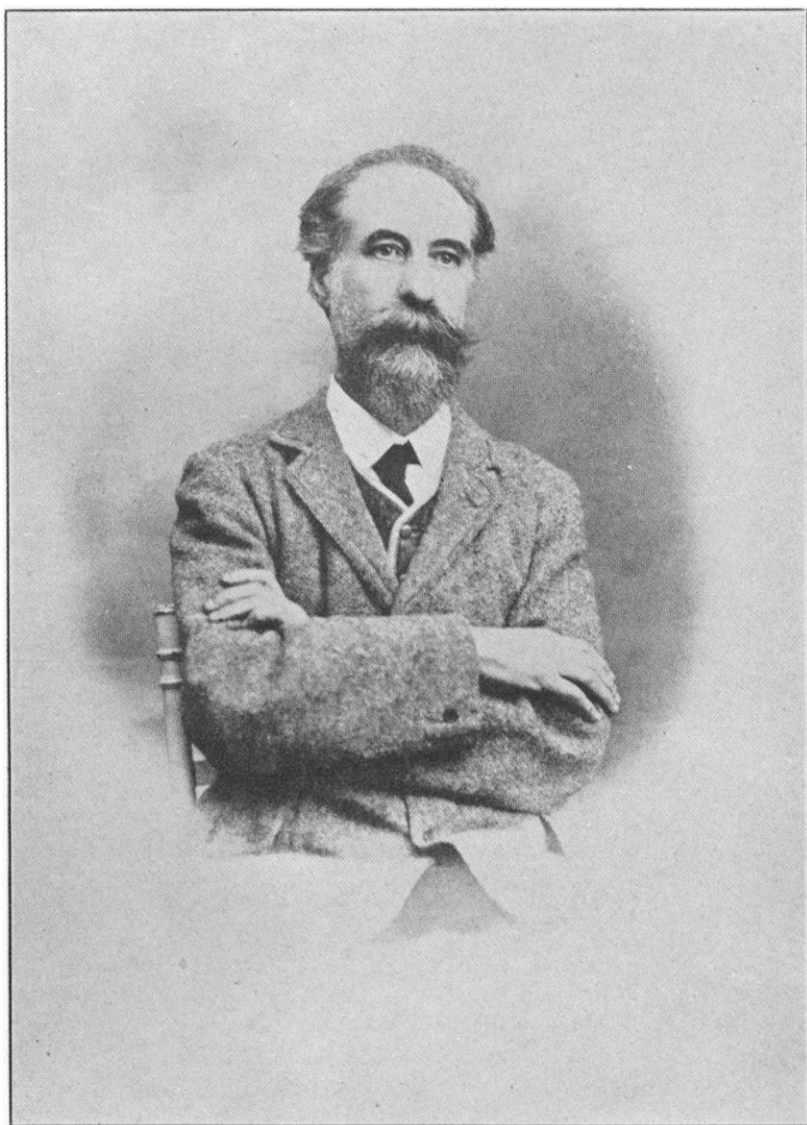
THE SONGS OF CHARLES KOECHLIN

By E. H. C. OLIPHANT

THE race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong; but in the arts the struggle for reputation is apt to end in favor of the loudest. Ability may be lost sight of, if it be not accompanied by a flair for advertisement. It is to those who can best make themselves heard in the din of contending rivals for popularity or for fame that the prize is likely to be awarded, the public attitude being not infrequently that of a member of an Australian cricketing team which visited England. In this man's eyes everything he was shown was more than matched by something in his own home city, and the comment he made after hearing a performance by a famous cornetist was, "We've a far better player in Hobart. If they were both playing you wouldn't HEAR this man." So I am afraid that some people seeing the title of this paper may say, "Charles Koechlin? He can't be much good: we haven't heard of him." It is, after all, only very few who recognize the truth of Swinburne's saying that fame is but an accidental attribute of genius. Were it otherwise, the subject of this article would be known throughout the world of music as one of the rarest and finest geniuses of the time.

I am dealing here only with his work in song, meaning by "song" a composition for a single voice with an accompaniment by a single instrument. On this definition, Koechlin's published songs consist of one song without opus number, five contained in a first volume of "Rondels," six in a second, eight in a third, sixteen in a first *recueil*, fourteen in a second, and twelve in a third—a total of sixty-two.

To obtain an adequate idea of the mentality of any song-composer, one of the first things to be done is to take note of his choice of poems to set. If it be true that a man may be judged by the company he keeps, it is no less true that a composer may be judged by the poets whose work he selects for illustration. From this point of view there is assuredly no fault to be found with the subject of this article. Every one of the baker's dozen of poets on whose work he has drawn for his published songs is a poet of note. More than half of them—Bouilhet, Fernand Gregh, Sully-Prudhomme, Hérédia, Robert d'Humières, Paul Bourget, and (in a French translation) Rudyard Kipling—supply but a single poem



Charles Koechlin

each; and Andre Chénier, but two. The remainder may be described as his favorite poets—Edmond Haraucourt, with half a dozen songs; Verlaine, with seven; Leconte de Lisle, with nine; Albert Samain, with eleven; and Théodore de Banville, with twenty. The total of Verlaines and Samains has been increased in the unpublished fourth *recueil*, in which are also five songs by Pierre Louÿs, some Klingsors, a Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and a Claudel.

The list is significant. Of the two French poets who have been most favored by composers of class, Paul Verlaine is far from occupying with Koechlin the predominant position he holds with Debussy and Fauré and with others of less account; and Victor Hugo is ignored. Koechlin's list contains, in fact, the names of only two men whose poems have been largely set by other composers of rank; and neither of these two—Verlaine and Leconte—is represented by the songs by which he is most widely known. Verlaine's pre-eminent popularity with composers is shown by the frequency with which they have fastened on "Il pleure dans mon cœur," "Mandoline," "Le ciel est par-dessus le toit," "La lune blanche," "En sourdine," and "Chanson d'automne"; but the only one of these set by Koechlin is the first-named. Judging by what he has done, he has so little cause to dread comparisons that it does not seem likely that timidity affords the reason for his avoidance of songs frequently set by others. What is more probable is that, as a result of his very individual outlook, what appeals to Debussy, Duparc, Fauré, Ravel, Chausson, Bordes, Hahn, "Poldowski," and others does not appeal to him. That is, from one point of view, matter for regret; for there are few better tests of any composer than comparison with other composers in the treatment of the same poems.

When we look over the list of Koechlin's poets, we find the Pagan element strong. Samain, Leconte, Hérédia, Chénier, Banville, Haraucourt are all worshippers of the antique, all, in varying degrees and in varying ways, colorists, and all Greek in the flawlessness of their form. The poems chosen for musical illustration show Koechlin's fondness for vastness, for abyssees of time and space, the dreadful, the unknowable; we see, too, a love of the old Pagan past when beauty was worshipped for its own sake, and a melancholy realization of the fact that it has gone, never to return. We see him now tragic, now playful, now fiercely barbaric; now treading a minuet with the grace of a courtier of the Grand Monarque; now glorying in the humid heat of a tropical forest; now looking across the sea at some phantom ship that never was and never will be; but his most characteristic moods are those in which he is obsessed by a sense of immensity and those in which he lives again a fancied life

in a dimly-remembered past. As to how his genius is suited by the several poets he has interpreted, that is a matter for subsequent consideration.

The first quality to be looked for in a song-composer is respect for the words he is seeking to clothe in sound. He must never sacrifice either the form or the lilt of the verse to his musical necessities; he must never set expediency above interpretative truth. He must avoid that fault so common in Rubinstein (whom one American critic most amazingly classes among the ten leading song-composers), the fault of supposing that words and phrases may be repeated *ad lib.* to suit the exigencies of his melodic line; and he must also avoid that fault of almost every English-speaking composer, the fault of treating the verse-rhythm as if it were something with which the musical rhythm need have no connection. From the first of these two faults Koechlin is almost entirely free, save in his treatment of the "Rondels" of Théodore de Banville. The rondel is an artificial form of verse, with repetitions provided for in certain specified places; but that fact does not warrant the composer in introducing repeats of his own—indeed, absolutely forbids his doing so. In the matter of accentuation I know no composer more careful than Koechlin. He fits his music to the words with a deftness of handling that is amazing. His sense of artistic fitness is almost unerring, and his rhythmic suppleness is extraordinary. In him the continuous changes of time-rhythm, so common in modern composers, are particularly marked; and some of his finest effects are got in this way.

It may be truly said of him that each of his songs has its own individuality, its own manner; yet the individuality of the man is over all, and one feels that, however the style may change, it is always his. In every song he strikes the right note almost infallibly; and not only is he correct in his general conception: he also illumines wonderfully for us words and phrases. He lays his foundation with care, and the most minute detail of his architecture receives the same thorough attention, with the result that every song is a finished work of art. His thoroughness is displayed in the re-writing to which most of his songs have been subjected; and his attention to detail, by the character of the instructions accompanying each song. Everything is thought out with the utmost care, and nothing is left to chance. The easy "a piacere" of the casual composer is not for him. He is too sincere, too genuinely artistic for such slipshod methods. He is a self-respecting artist, proud of his work, and not a professional purveyor of pot-boiling popularities. If the composer of that stamp is at the extreme of indifference, Koechlin is at the

other extreme of meticulous care in regard to the interpretation of his work, so that his instructions are very frequent, very minute, very exact. I know nothing of his methods of work beyond what I can learn from the evidence from his song-volumes, but I do not think I am wrong in judging him to be severely self-critical.

Unless I woefully overestimate him, he is a song-composer of an unequalled sense of largeness and greatness of design. That is where he differs from other great French composers and approaches Wagner. He is indeed musically a blend of French and German, as is not unfitting in one whose parents were Alsatians, though he himself was born in Paris and received there the whole of his musical education. He is usually ranked with the impressionists; but his impressionism is very different from that of Fauré, Debussy, Ravel. He is sometimes heavier-handed than they are wont to be (though nothing can exceed the lightness of his touch in songs where he deems lightness called for); but there is not one of his fellow-composers that is capable of his tremendous landscapes. They work on a small scale; he, on a large one.

Koechlin is an experimentalist, like every other great Frenchman: he is not content to accept and follow conventions; he prefers to make his own. In his later work the element of unexpectedness is continually obtruding itself: in fact, one feels at times as if he is seeking to give us the unexpected. He offers material of a wonderful richness of texture, with curious and original harmonies, strange progressions, and an ignoring of modulations in favor of dissonances and chords transported directly to unrelated planes, the key having at times a merely nominal existence. Often the melody is intimately fused with the accompaniment, melody and harmony being conceived as one. The shading is not always as delicate as it might be; but the harmonies are of extraordinary variety, and for that reason do not cloy, as Debussy's are apt to do. His accompaniments are elaborate in the extreme; and his work is of enormous difficulty—a fact which has doubtless stood in the way of its acceptance. Singers are apt to look askance at songs that call for such a combination of qualities as do many of these; and accompanists may be pardoned for declining accompaniments that demand the possession of three hands—in places, indeed, even four hands.

Koechlin has, of course, his mannerisms—*e. g.*, a fondness for triplets (and, in the accompaniment, for broken triplets) and for the tremolo, to which he is even readier to resort than Bantock is to resort to arpeggios. But his conventions, such as they are, are his own. His daring is without limit: he writes to please himself; and if the expression of his ideas be impossible of accomplishment without

an ignoring of traditional laws, he refuses to consider himself bound and promptly cuts himself free.

In the songs of Koechlin there is much more than skilful writing, much more than an inexhaustible wealth of harmony: there is an abundance of ideas. The composer invariably knows what he wants to say, and it is rarely that he does not succeed in saying it. His vastness of design sometimes goes beyond what seem to be the limits of a song; but his conception is ordinarily well sustained throughout, even when, in the excess of his pictorial quality, he becomes most kaleidoscopic. His work is interesting for both subject and treatment, for both its musical beauty and its intellectual stimulus. He may at first acquaintance strike one as affected; but the idea does not survive a study of his work. What he feels he writes; what he writes he feels.

I have spoken of him as not altogether French in the largeness of his vision. There is also about much of his work a certain gauntness that marks him as one apart from the other great French composers; but in most of his other qualities he marches abreast of them, especially in his freedom from scholastic restrictions, his hatred of the commonplace, his precision, his power of enwrapping his subject in an atmosphere that springs from and is natural to it. As with most of the modern French school, with him the idea is predominant; and also, as with them, the main development of the idea is to be found in the accompaniment, the pianist's position being thus in many of the songs lifted from second place to first. Some of these songs are in reality duets between a singer and a pianist; in others the pianist is the principal performer, and the singer is but an accompanist. This is in accord with one of the main tendencies of modern song; and it is to be feared that, though the song has gained much thereby, it has also lost something. To realise the gain, one needs to look back to the thin and commonplace melody of the French song of the seventies, to its timid and colorless harmony, and to its regular and unenterprising rhythm.

Both his best and his most advanced work—and the two are not necessarily the same—are contained in his *receuils*. Between the Koechlin of the first volume and the Koechlin of the third there is a world of difference, and the second volume shows the transition, though it is only its last number that is in the manner of the third volume. The first two series of "Rondels" are obviously earlier than any of the *receuils*. The third is of much the same period as the first *receuil*—rather later, on the whole. The dates are as follows:

Rondels, ser. 1, 1890-1894; 2, 1891-1895; 3, 1896-1899.

Receuils, v. 1, 1890-1902; 2, 1894-1904; 3, 1899-1909.



The one song not included in any of these volumes, a setting of Bouilhet's "Moisson prochaine," I judge to be one of the very best among the composer's earlier works, though in spirit it shows an approach to his later manner.

It is wonderful to note that the first song of the first recueil Haraucourt's "Clair de lune," is of the same date as the earliest of the "Rondels," for it is one of the composer's altogether perfect things. In it Koechlin emerges fully armed, a Pallas Athene springing from the head of Zeus. It is a fit preface to a marvellously fine volume. Had I space, I could dwell rapturously on almost every song in the book; but the loveliest of all, to my thinking, is Leconte's "Le colibri," a glorious piece of tone-painting, gorgeous in color, and expressing to perfection the idea inspiring it, a gem beside which Chausson's setting of the same lyric, beautiful as it is, seems pale and insignificant. If, in my opinion, it comes first, I still regard it as only *primus inter pares*, for quite unsurpassable are the gentle melancholy and dainty grace of "Le Menuet" (Grieg), the delicate playfulness of "Dame du ciel" (Haraucourt), and the truth and beauty of the three numbers composing op. 15, three wonderful pictures based on verses from Leconte's "Poèmes antiques."

The second *recueil* contains three songs on the same lofty level—a tremendous setting of Leconte's "Les rêves morts," a Fauré-like rendering of the "Sur la grève" of Humières, with a marvellous cinematograph picture of the movement of the sea, and, perhaps the finest thing in the volume, a setting of Verlaine's "Mon rêve familier." In this the atmosphere is wonderfully caught, the idea being realised and depicted perfectly. The right air of mystery is maintained, and, though the tone is subdued throughout, due emphasis is never lacking. The time-changes are delicate and effective; and the greatness and daring of the finale could hardly come from anyone but Koechlin. One would have thought that this fine poem would have made an appeal to many composers; but I can recall no setting of it save this. It is strange to note, by way of contrast, that in some of the other Verlaine songs Koechlin gets nearer to ordinary "prettiness" than he does elsewhere, though there is none of them in which the tendency is not set off by solid excellences.

In the third volume we come upon a new Koechlin, though a Koechlin foreshadowed in "Automne," the last and the latest in date of the songs of the second volume. If greatness in song be defined, as I hold it should be, as "a beautiful rendering of a complete realisation of a worthy idea," every one of the songs in the first two volumes answers the requirements; in the third we get some—"Le

cortège d'Amphitrite," "La maison du matin," "L'île ancienne"—that do not. They are, all three, of no little excellence, are all settings of lovely poems, in all the spirit of the poet has been thoroughly entered into, and all are interesting; yet there is something lacking. It is, in a word, beauty. The voice part is overshadowed, fragmentary, often little more than a recitative, so subordinated to the accompaniment that it ceases to have any separate interest—even any interest at all. These songs are, in fact, not vocal: indeed, from the voice part all trace of melody has been carefully removed. It is not to be supposed that there is no sort of beauty in these numbers; but it is not a consistent and sustained beauty. There is a vagueness, an indefiniteness, an anæmic grayness that is very far removed from the clearness, the straightforwardness, and the overwhelming vitality of the earlier songs. Much of the composer's individuality is gone, the harmonies have lost their inevitability, the melody is no longer full of life and meaning, and the old variety—in itself a marvel—is lacking. Some of these numbers are wonderful experiments; but the best of those in the earlier volumes are much more than wonderful experiments: they are wonderful songs.

Writing thus, I feel that I shall have in disagreement with me not merely perversive young technicians, but also the composer himself. That is, it is true, only an inference; but it is grounded on the fact that the sincerity that marks these later songs is no less obvious than the sincerity that distinguished the earlier ones, so that the new attitude of the composer is no mere pose. It seems to follow that he entertains the conviction that by his present means he is getting nearer to truth and beauty than he did before. Personally, however, I do feel that in this volume he has come under the influence of Debussy, and that the influence has not been altogether for good, and has led him at times to seem afraid to be himself. The old certainty, breadth, sonority, and beauty have given place to an insubstantiality which is due to his thinking of nothing but atmosphere; and it is a singular, and, to me, unaccountable fact, that while in every other respect he shows all his old care and exactitude, he exhibits in two of the finest Samains in the volume, "Le sommeil de Canope" and "Améthyste," especially in the former, an unwonted prosodic carelessness. After coming to regard him as infallible in such matters, I resent having "tendresse" represented by , and "calices" by .

It must be understood that these strictures are only relative. If less satisfactory than either of its two predecessors, the third

receuil is a fine volume nevertheless. The spirit pervading it is a somewhat elusive spirit; but, once it has been caught, the inherent loveliness of the finer songs becomes perceptible. They may be described in colloquial phrase as "growing on one." Moreover even in the case of the less pleasing songs, I regard the method and the manner of them as illustrating a phase in Koechlin's development. I feel sure that he has not sacrificed his splendid individuality on the altar of a modernity which appeals only to the intellect, even though that appeal is made through a beauty of its own—a beauty that is subtle and complex and evasive. There are plentiful indications that the soul of the composer has remained the same, though the manifestations of it have changed. The composer of the Samains in this volume is the composer of the Chéniers in the first, in which there is as true an atmosphere as in the best of them, together with more loveliness. The difference is that the loveliness is, in the later songs, seeking to find a new form, and has not always succeeded.

It is not only the three songs I have singled out for mention that are more or less unvocal; it is not only in them that Koechlin's gift of lovely melody shows itself merely in brief, unsustained snatches. Some of the others are far more fragmentary than they, far more vague, more indefinite, more elusive. If I rank them higher, it is not that they have more unity, but that they have more beauty; not that the voice-part has more independent interest, but that the conception of the poem has more inherent loveliness. Where the voice is so distinctly in the background as it is in some of these songs, there needs to be superlative beauty in the accompaniment for full atonement to be made. I am not going to endeavor to defend my attitude (which may indeed be quite indefensible) when I say that I would rather have one passage of supreme loveliness in a song than a more commonplace beauty sustained throughout.

There are doubtless young musicians who will, by reason of certain technical qualities that characterise it, proclaim the latest of the songs contained in this volume, "*Soir païen*," to be the very crown of Koechlin's work. That will be to set the means above the end, the effort above the achievement. Technique is merely the road by which the artist travels to attain the beauty that is his aim, or, to change the metaphor, the tool with which he strives to carve it out of the imprisoning rock. Technique is to be judged not for its own sake, but for the effect it creates. In this case the composer has achieved a work of beauty which will appeal only to those who are able—whether easily or laboriously—to enter into the spirit that animated him; but, finely conceived as it is, I cannot think that in it the composer has excelled himself.

The finest song in the volume is the earliest in date, being ascribed to the years 1899-1901. These are probably the dates for the original work, the song's position at the very end of the book indicating perhaps that the pianoforte version was much later than the original orchestral score. It is a very Wagnerian work of quite barbaric grandeur, with a reminiscence of "Die Walküre" that can hardly be unintentional. But for one drawback, it would rank with Koechlin's greatest work in song. The drawback is that it is not really a song at all, but rather a cantata. An anthem is almost as far from being a song as a mosaic is from being a cameo; and this "Chant de Kala Nag," if not a mosaic, certainly treats the poem as one. Its repeats may be quite in place in a choral work, but they are altogether opposed to the spirit of the Song. Having regard to its original form, the work must be pronounced wonderful; it is only when it is regarded as a solo song that any fault is to be found with it.

The composer's op. 1, constituting his first series of "Rondels"—the "Rondels of Théodore de Banville—must, taken as a whole, be pronounced immature; but the immaturity is that of a man of genius. Here we see what is not very perceptible in even the earliest of the three *recueils*, the influence of Koechlin's first master at the Paris Conservatoire de Musique, Massenet. The influence of his later instructor, Fauré, is more evident in the later work; here it is the influence of the older, the more melodious, the less sincere, and the less vital composer that makes itself felt. In the third series, op. 14, we get nearer to the true Koechlin, the Koechlin of the songs already dealt with. There is, however, a much finer and richer development in the first *recueil* than in the third series of "Rondels."

Among the collected songs there were very few that seemed to me to leave something to be desired, and even those few were songs of much merit; among the "Rondels" it is the majority that are in this case—all save half-a-dozen numbers in the entire series. If I thus group them with the less satisfactory of the later songs, I must not be misunderstood as crediting them with the same qualities and the same defects. If they are on the whole as far from greatness and as far from failure, it yet must be said that as a rule they fail where the others succeed, succeed where the others fail. If some of the composer's latest songs fall below the high level he has set, it is, in the main, because he has made the voice-part merely an accessory and has abandoned melody, and for these things not even the high sincerity informing all of the songs and the marvellous technique displayed can altogether atone; whereas these earlier songs

are instinct with melody and daintiness. What most of them lack is significance and that reverence for the form of the poem that is so marked in the composer's later work.

Of the four songs of outstanding merit in the first and third series, "*La guerre*" is tremendous and must be very effective with orchestra. Its great discords are most suitable to the subject; and the only flaw in the song is that it ruins the *rondel* form of de Banville's verse. But for that, it would be one of Koechlin's very greatest. The other three have nothing to mar their glorious perfection; but the *grandeur* of "*Les étoiles*" may well be held to give that song prééminence over the lyrical rapture of "*Le jour*" and the playful grace of "*Le thé*," a number which suffices of itself to lift the first series into distinction. In this delightful song the pronunciation of the name "*Ellen*" may seem a fault to one of English race; but it is to be remembered that the poet was French, and doubtless pronounced it French-fashion, as Koechlin does. An English singer might do well to substitute "*Elaine*." Very dainty also are "*L'air*" and "*Le Matin*" in volume two.

Casting a retrospective glance over the songs dealt with, in order to see how Koechlin is suited by the various poets he has set, it is to be noted that the many songs that warrant one in giving him a very high place among the song-composers of the day are not confined to the works of one or two poets, but include his single settings of Hérédia, Sully-Prudhomme, Bouilhet, and Gregh, and his two of Chénier. With Kipling, too, he has scored a great success with "*Chant de Kala Nag*." Of the poets he has set more frequently, I have no hesitation in saying that he has been most successful with Leconte, since all his nine settings of poems by that writer are masterpieces. The Banville settings are mostly early, but number half-a-dozen fine things; while the work of Edmond Haraucourt he has used to excellent purpose in "*Le nénuphar*" and in the four songs of op. 7. In his later years his best results have been obtained in Verlaine's "*Mon rêve familial*" and "*Il pleure dans mon cœur*." All of the songs indicated are masterly; and, if Koechlin is most at home with Leconte, it is because his genius is better suited by a vision of the stillness of death and a sense of tragic mystery brooding upon the waters than by idyllic fancies and a regretful reconstruction of faded glories, and that his soul craves the vast spaces and the glowing, if somewhat stark, color of Leconte rather than the enclosed gardens and the subdued tones of Verlaine and Samain. And I say again, as I have said before, that in this estimate of the true bent of his genius the composer will, I feel sure, most heartily disagree with me.

There is an aspect of his art to which I must not fail to refer: that is, the extraordinarily high level at which his work is maintained. Most composers of even the highest class have their absolute failures; a few of them occasionally sink still lower—to the deepest deep—when they descend to the banal; and even those who do neither are apt to produce work that is uninteresting. Koechlin, it may safely be said, is never uninteresting; and if there is a degree of demerit less marked than that—if, that is to say, there are songs that are not uninteresting, but that leave one cold—Koechlin may be credited with invariable superiority to it, too, for he never leaves one cold—at least, he has no such effect on me; and one can, of course, speak only of one's own experience.

And, besides the high level he maintains, there is in his work an extraordinary range. Lyrical rapture, dainty grace, playful humor, tragic gloom, tender pathos, barbaric grandeur, haunting dread, and poignant grief all have their place in these wonderful volumes of song. I know no other composer with both so much individuality and such variety.

The task of comparing his work with that of other great French composers is one I do not particularly care to undertake; but I suppose it must be done. Debussy is subtler, but more fragile. Koechlin describes where Debussy suggests; or perhaps it would be more correct to say that Koechlin sometimes describes, whereas Debussy is invariably content with suggestion. Koechlin has neither Debussy's exquisite sensibility, nor his tendency to degenerate into preciosity. The diabolical impishness of "Fantoche" is not in Koechlin; but neither is it in anyone else. Debussy's delicacy of touch may seem often to be beyond Koechlin, yet one or two of the latter's songs display a dainty grace that is well nigh unsurpassable. Debussy was certainly the more original; but the technical qualities displayed by both are remarkable, and each has bestowed upon his work the most scrupulous care. In each there is a combination of the material with the imaginative, the ethereal with the real; but in Koechlin it is the material that predominates; in Debussy, the ethereal. The latter has far less variety than Koechlin, but far more subtlety. He is a worker in nuances, while the other is a great and a bold colorist who in his later songs is deliberately avoiding the glowing color he knows so well how to use. Like the other great French song-composers, Duparc, Fauré, Ravel, both of them know how to get at the very heart of the poems they set.

In Fauré there is a more delicate perfume, a serenity that Koechlin seldom attains. His mastery of rhythm is even greater, and his wealth of harmonic interest is not inferior; but, for all his

genius, the gigantic conceptions of the younger man are beyond him. Duparc's songs are few in number, but of the highest artistry. They are not of the complexity of the songs of the other men dealt with here; but they are of a rare beauty of texture. No touch can be surer than his, no melodic line more perfect; but he is the least original of the five. Finally there is Ravel, most original of all (or at least sharing the honor with Debussy), supple, ironically observant, drily, yet tenderly, humorous, fantastic, yet realistic, bizarre, yet with the utmost clarity of vision, incisive, more robust than Debussy, more various than any of them, save only Koechlin. In power of suggestion not even Debussy can surpass him. In his best songs he is not descriptive, as he is so often stated to be, but, instead of expressing his ideas, gives hints to stimulate the imagination. By the side of such songs most of Koechlin's must of necessity seem somewhat labored; but it is to be said that Ravel's methods would be unsuited to the bulk of the poems that Koechlin has set. Into songs of the sombre, the weird, the tragic, Ravel has not (so far as I am aware) ventured.

That the publication of Koechlin's fourth *recueil* will not be long delayed must be the hope of everyone who knows the three existing collections and has an appreciation of and affection for what is best in modern song.